

SELF-EMPOWERMENT AS THE GOAL OF EDUCATION— IN THE LIGHT OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

Swami Bhajanananda

Knowledge Society

The history of human civilization shows that humanity has passed through three socio-economic revolutions. First came, in prehistoric times, the Agricultural Revolution which gave rise to the Agricultural Society. In the 18th century came the Industrial Revolution which gave rise to the Industrial Society. In the last decade of 20th century began the Knowledge Revolution which is bringing into existence the ‘Knowledge Society’. India’s performance in the industrial sector has been poor, and we missed the Industrial Revolution. But India is actively participating in the Knowledge Revolution, and we are now transiting into a knowledge economy and knowledge society.

In classical economics, four factors were held to be responsible for economic growth: land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship. In the agricultural society, economy depended on land and labour. In the industrial society, capital and entrepreneurship were the key factors of economic growth. In the knowledge society, knowledge is the key factor in economy. Considering the important role knowledge plays in knowledge economy and knowledge society, knowledge is now regarded as ‘knowledge capital’.

The idea of ‘knowledge capital’ had its origin in the 1960’s when an American economist Edward Denison attempted to measure the sources of economic growth of the United States. He found that the usual parameters, labour and capital plus technology could account for only 60 percent economic growth; the remaining 40 percent was unknown. Later, other American economists Robert Solow, James

Tobin and others showed that this 40 percent came from ‘human capital’. The idea of ‘human capital’ was extended to developing countries by Theodore Schulz. Now in the 21st century we are transiting from human capital to ‘knowledge capital’.

Coming to India, it is well known that, until the 12th century, it was the wealthiest nation in the world, producing a third of global GDP. But after it succumbed to foreign invasions in the 11th century, its economy began to decline, and in 1500 its share in global GDP was only 25 percent. China overtook it, and Western Europe’s share began to expand. After 1700, with British occupation, India became one of the poorest nations in the world. Britain, Europe and America came to dominate world economy. It was only in the last decade of the 20th century, with the onset of knowledge revolution, that India’s fortunes began to rise dramatically. China has already become an economic superpower. Indian economy is now poised to become the third largest in the world, but its share in world GDP is only 2 percent.

In a knowledge society knowledge becomes the main motive power bringing about social transformation and economic growth. As the economy grows, the society must undergo corresponding changes; then only can the growth be sustained. Social transformation and economic growth are thus mutually interdependent. And both are driven by knowledge. By knowledge is meant not only technical knowledge of computers, etc and business-management knowledge. Every kind of knowledge, including age-old traditional knowledge about health, medicine, food processing, textiles, pottery, other mechanical skills—every kind of knowledge can be used to leverage economic growth. For sustainable economic growth and social transformation, subjective knowledge or self-knowledge is as important as objective knowledge.

How is the knowledge for social transformation and economic growth generated? Through education. Education is the engine which produces new knowledge, preserves knowledge and distributes knowledge to all people.

Education in the Knowledge Society

Education as the creator and sustainer of knowledge power is the very foundation on which knowledge economy operates and knowledge society functions. Unlike in earlier societies, in the knowledge society, education has two unique features: life-long education and education ‘to be’. The Unesco appointed a Commission under the chairmanship of Edgar Faure in 1972, and another Commission under the chairmanship of Jacques Delors in 1993, to study the purpose and function of education in the present-day world. In the Reports submitted by both the Faure Commission and the Delor Commission two common points stand out as unique. These are: ‘Life-long learning’ and ‘Learning to Be’.

Life-long Education

The development of ‘knowledge economy’ requires a flexible education system, which includes the following steps, according to the Delors Commission Report.

1. It begins with BASIC Education (including Primary and Preprimary levels) which provides the basic tools for learning:

- (a) Language—for reading and writing.
- (b) Elementary arithmetic and geometry to deal with quantitative problems such as transactions and measurements.
- (c) Geography or Environmental science—to understand the world in which one lives.
- (d) Rudiments of Computer operations.

2. In the next stage known as SECONDARY Education the student prepares himself

- (a) to acquire basic skills (including computer operation).

- (b) to communicate effectively with others (by learning languages) and participate in business transactions (by learning mathematics).
- (c) to understand the different branches of science.
- (d) to ‘decide their own future in the light of their own tastes and aptitudes.’

3. In the third stage known as TERTIARY or HIGHER Education done in colleges or technical institutes, the student acquires:

- (a) mastery of some core subjects and ability;
- (b) technical skills, including advanced computer applications;
- (c) critical thinking;
- (d) creative or innovative thinking to discover or invent new knowledge through research.
- (e) ‘soft skills’ such as communication skills, leadership, problem-solving skills, teamwork, service, etc.
- (f) capacity to transmit knowledge to others through teaching.

4. LIFE-LONG Education. The three stages of formal education are restricted to childhood, adolescence and early youth. But in a knowledge society education should continue all through one’s life. About this, the Delors Commission Report states, “The time to learn is now the whole lifetime, and each field of knowledge spreads into and enriches the others. [In] the twenty first century education is so varied in its tasks and forms that it covers all the activities that enable people, from childhood to old age, to acquire a living knowledge of the world, of other people and themselves....It is the educational continuum, coextensive with life and widened to take in the whole society....” Education throughout life is done in three ways:

- (a) Formally—replenishing or adding new knowledge through in-service training, refresher courses, or by utilizing ‘distance education’ facilities provided by ‘open universities’.
- (b) Informally—through one’s own independent studies, reading and research.

- (c) Learning from the experiences gained in one's life, especially learning from one's mistakes or from the adverse criticism made by other people. Sri Ramakrishna used to say 'as long as I live, so long do I learn.'

Learning to Be

There are two widely accepted criteria to measure success. One is to see how much a person *has*, how much money, cars, buildings, or even knowledge he possesses. The second criterion is the ability of a person to adjust himself to social conventions and behave like a 'normal person', submitting to the ways and opinions of others sacrificing one's own independent thinking and other capacities. Education too until recently had for its aim to help people attain success in the above two senses of the term.

But success is an insatiable goal. Moreover experience has shown that many of the so-called successful people have warped personalities or lead miserable lives. On the other hand, as Einstein has stated, success should be judged not by what a person takes from life but by what he gives to life.

One person capable of original thinking, innovation, and foresight can through his creative work, discovery or invention, do more good to society than a thousand uncreative, unimaginative people who spend all their energies in accommodating themselves to the whims of others or meaningless social conventions. Therefore education should aim at producing creative geniuses and original thinkers who are enriched resource persons capable of contributing to society far more than what they take from it. This understanding was one of the factors which led to the development of the idea of 'learning to be'.

Another basis for the idea of 'learning to be' is that, owing to the extreme complexity and diversity of human life and the rapidity of socio-economic changes in the present-day world, human life has come to be centred on individuals, rather than

on the family or society. Family, caste and community identities are disappearing. Many people have no other identity than as individuals. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness that the creativity, capacities and talents of individuals really belong to the society; in fact they constitute humanity's greatest asset. Therefore all efforts should be made to protect and encourage individual freedom, individual creativity and talents.

In recent years support for the idea of 'learning to be' has come from a new theory of education known as 'constructivism'. This theory holds that each person constructs his own understanding of the world around him based on his own experiences. Each person lives in his own world, and has his own frame of reference. When he gets new knowledge, he interprets it in accordance with his own frame of reference. According to this view, education is a process of enabling a student to learn himself.

Whatever might be the circumstances which led to the development of the concept of 'Learning to be' as one of the main aims of education, its acceptance by educationists all over the world is an important trend in today's world and has much significance for youths. Therefore we discuss this point further in the next sections.

Learning to Be as Total Human Development

Total Human Development

'Learning to be' may be regarded as 'total human development', which means the development of physical, mental, moral and spiritual dimensions of human personality. In the development of the physical dimension of personality, the chief concern is the maintenance of good health. The development of the mental dimension of the personality means the development of all the faculties of the mind. Human mind has three main faculties: cognition (knowing/thinking), affection (feeling), and

volition (willing). Mental development should involve the development of all the three faculties.

Development of Cognitive faculty

Cognition is now one of the important subjects of study and research which has given rise to a new branch of science known as cognitive science. In the educational field, studies in cognition have given rise to new theories of learning.

In the ordinary industrial or commercial society, education is centred on ‘learning to know’, ‘learning to do’, and ‘learning to live together’; that is, education has for its aim the *acquisition of knowledge, skill and values*. But in knowledge society, education is a life-long process, and is centred on ‘learning to be’. What does this mean?

According to the Faure Commission report of 1972 (mentioned earlier) ‘learning to be’ means education which enables everyone ‘to solve his own problems, make his own decisions, and shoulder his own responsibilities.’ Explaining this, the Delors Commission Report of 1996, states that in the 21st century, ‘the problem will then no longer be so much to prepare children for a given society as to continuously provide everyone with the powers and intellectual reference points they need for understanding the world around them and behaving responsibly and fairly. More than ever, education’s essential role seems to be to give people the *freedom* of thought, judgement, feeling and imagination they need in order to develop their talents and remain as much as possible in control of their lives.... In an ever-changing world in which social and economic innovation seems to be one of the main driving forces, a special place should doubtless be given to the qualities of imagination and creativity, the clearest manifestations of human freedom... The twenty-first century needs this variety of talents and personalities, it also needs the exceptional individuals who are also essential in any civilization....’ (*Learning the Treasure Within*, Jacques Delors et

al, pages 94-95) Concluding the above discussion, the Delors Commission Report states: “Education is above all an inner journey whose stages correspond to those of the continuous maturing of the personality.”

There has been a paradigm shift in educational thinking in recent years. The main ideas of this new perspective are as follows.

1. The capacity for knowing is inherent in man.
2. Knowledge is inseparable from life; problems of life can be solved through appropriate knowledge.
3. Knowledge has now become multidisciplinary; everyone has to be endowed with different types of knowledge and skills.
4. Life offers different, complex situations; to respond to these situations one has to evolve new solutions and for this one must develop creativity, innovation.
5. The most important thing is to take correct decisions; for this one must have inner freedom and autonomy.

In a word, **self-empowerment** is what ‘learning to be’ means. Self-empowerment has come to be regarded as the aim and purpose of education, in recent educational thinking. For some years ‘value education’ had been given much importance, especially in India. Now the emphasis has been shifted to self-empowerment.

Here the question arises: what is the role of the teacher in this scheme of education? The teacher was formerly regarded as the ‘provider’ of knowledge. But in the knowledge society the teacher functions chiefly as an ‘enabler’. A teacher is one who enables a student to teach himself. The capacity to know is inherent in the student; the teacher has only to awaken the inherent capacities of the student and to guide their development.

Swami Vivekananda's Views on Learning

Swami Vivekananda's views on learning are surprisingly similar to the ideas given above. According to Swamiji, the capacity to know, to understand, is an inherent property of the soul. All knowledge is within, but is covered by the veil of ignorance. When this veil is removed, knowledge shines forth. Books and teachers provide the inputs to remove the veil. His definition of education, 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man', sums up his views on education.

Some of the statements of Swamiji on learning, which are found in different places in the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* are brought together in a connected way below.

'Knowledge is inherent in man, no knowledge comes from outside; it is all inside. What we say a man "knows" should, in strict psychological language, be what he "discovers" or "unveils"... by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge. We say Newton discovered gravitation. Was it sitting anywhere in a corner waiting for him? It was in his own mind.... The falling of an apple gave the suggestion to Newton, and he studied his own mind. He rearranged all the previous links of thought in his mind and discovered a new link among them, which we call the law of gravitation. All knowledge therefore, secular or spiritual, is in the human mind. In many cases it is not discovered, but remains covered, and when the covering is being slowly taken off, we say "we are learning". (c.w.1.28)

"you cannot teach a child any more than you can grow a plant." (c.w.5.410)
"You can supply the growing seed with the materials for the making of its body, bringing to it the earth, the water, the air that it wants....It will take all that it wants by its own nature. It will assimilate and grow by its own nature." (c.w.3.247) "So with the education of a child. A child educates itself." (c.w.4.55)

Development of emotions

The process of learning that we discussed above pertains to the cognitive faculty. For total human development, it is necessary to have the development of the other two faculties—emotion and will—also. These two faculties are chiefly concerned with moral life and spiritual life. First we take up recent views on emotions.

Formerly psychologists used to regard emotions as the cause of most of the problems in individual and social life. In recent years the understanding has come that only the bad emotions are to be eliminated. Good emotions like love, compassion, aesthetic appreciation of beauty, music etc, enrich human life, ennoble human relationships and create a balanced personality. In recent years Daniel Goleman and other psychologists have developed the idea of ‘emotional intelligence’. By this is meant the capacity to understand emotions and use them creatively to enrich and ennoble one’s own life and the lives of others. It is in the field of emotions that ‘values’ come into operation. By ‘value education’ is meant the cultivation of good feelings and sentiments like love, kindness, truthfulness, service attitude, etc. In other words, by ‘value education’ is meant ‘moral education’.

The real problem about emotions is the control of lower or bad emotions such as lust, anger, cruelty, destructive tendency, fear etc. Youth is the time when the negative emotions grow stronger. Although these negative emotions constitute a big problem for the youths, we cannot deal with it in detail here as it is a big subject which needs a separate treatment. Here we wish to mention only one point.

We have already mentioned the difference between good emotions and bad emotions. Most of the bad emotions are the result of the influence of the body on the mind. The body is the seat of animal instincts such as sex-drive, anger, cruelty, destructiveness, fear etc. These instinctual drives cause the production of hormones

which indirectly influence the mind. Early youth is the time when some of these instinctual drives become active. This can create profound disturbance and conflicts in the minds of youths, and can seriously affect their studies and job prospects. This is the period when they need counselling and guidance in dealing with the drives and impulses rising in the mind. The company of virtuous youngsters and the guidance of a wise guide can help youths to sublimate their instinctual drives through creativity and orientate themselves properly to life and reality.

While the lower emotions associated with instinctual drives are to be controlled or sublimated through socially useful channels, the higher emotions are to be refined and cultivated by pursuing higher values such as Truth, Love, Beauty etc. Loving family relationships, friendship with virtuous people, pursuit of arts such as music, painting, reading or writing good books—these are some of the ways of refining and cultivating higher emotions. By the cultivation of good emotions one comes to have what Daniel Goleman calls ‘emotional intelligence’ Emotional intelligence may be introduced as a subject of study at higher secondary and graduate levels in schools and colleges.

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the pioneering educationists in India who gave importance to the inclusion of the pursuit of arts in education as a means of refining, cultivating and sublimating human emotions, and developing the aesthetic sense.

Development of the Will

We have seen that ‘learning to be’ involves the all-round development of personality. Cultivation of different types of knowledge, skills, and refined emotions and feelings, enriches one’s life and enables a person to participate in a wide variety of socially useful and constructive activities. But the effectiveness of his performance depends upon his capacity to empower himself, his capacity to adapt himself and

respond to different situations, his capacity to face difficult situations and take risks. All this means development of a strong will. It is the strength of will that appears as inner strength or strong mind.

Swami Vivekananda gave great importance to strength in his teachings. This is because, without inner strength a person cannot attain success in life or develop his inherent capacities or even practise virtues. We give below some exhortations of Swamiji on inner strength.

‘Know that all sins and all evils can be summed up in that one word, weakness. It is weakness that is the motive power in all evil doing; it is weakness that is the source of all selfishness; it is weakness that makes them manifest what they are not in reality.’

‘Stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourselves. Therefore make your own future.’

‘The will is stronger than anything else. Everything must go down before the will, for that comes from God and God Himself. The pure and strong will is omnipotent.’(c.w.3.224)

Self-Empowerment as the Goal of Education

We have seen that in a knowledge society ‘learning to be’ plays a key role, and by ‘learning to be’ is meant ‘total human development’ which aims at self-empowerment. And self-empowerment refers to the inner freedom or autonomy enjoyed by a person who is endowed with multidisciplinary knowledge and skill and has the inner flexibility and capability to respond to different situations in life. Apart from the Mittals, Ambanis, Tatas, Birlas and other famous leaders of industry, there are hundreds of self-empowered people in society. Look at the life of a district magistrate, a top-ranking police officer, a successful business executive, a well-

known physician. How many different types of situations they have to face everyday! Then there are those whom Abraham Maslow called ‘self-actualizing’ people, such as great writers, poets, painters, scientists, mystics. These people may not be successful in a worldly sense; they may not be able to respond to different, difficult situations in life, and some of them lead secluded lives. But they are tremendously creative people, endowed with extraordinary talents and capacities and contribute much to the progress or welfare of humanity. They also are to be regarded as self-empowered people.

When we study the lives of these successful people in India, we can see that most of them attained success by their individual initiative, hard work and ambition, and by overcoming many social obstacles such as lack of financial resources, caste prejudices, jealousy of colleagues, corruption and so on. Very few of them have been helped by the present educational system. The current thinking among today’s educationists and educational planners is to develop a new system of education based on a new understanding of the meaning and purpose of education, and a new concept of learning and teaching, which inspires, supports and promotes self-empowerment, creativity and self-actualization. The purpose of education should be to enable students to develop their inner resources, become inwardly free to respond to different situations create something new, and contribute more to society than take from it. And this process of self-empowering education should continue all through one’s life.

Spiritual Self-empowerment

Ego-centred Empowerment

The type of self-empowerment discussed above is ego-centred self-empowerment. There are thousands of such self-empowered individuals in society.

Much of the success achieved by business companies, in the administrative departments, in hospitals, research institutions, political parties, etc are the result of the work of self-empowered individuals.

But ego-centred empowerment has certain drawbacks. Success is like a heady wine and can make people egoistic. Competitive success very often causes much mental stress and tension, which may lead to psychosomatic ailments. Moreover, worldly success does not bring lasting fulfillment. In fact wealth and success very often create a void, or sense of meaninglessness, boredom, anxiety, depression and other so-called existential problems.

All these drawbacks of ego-centred empowerment arise from a single cause: ***self-alienation***. Our true nature, our true Self, is neither the body nor the mind but the spirit. What is known as the ego is a false self or lower self. Work done by this false self or ego alienates a person from his true Self. It is this inner self-alienation that is the cause of most of the mistakes we commit in life and the problems we create for ourselves and for others.

The true Self or Atman

What is this spirit, our true Self? The real nature of the spirit, the true Self, was discovered only in India by ancient sages. In all other countries the spirit, also known as the soul, has been identified with the mind. The ancient Indian sages made the following discoveries about the true Self of man.

1. The true Self, known as the Atman, is different from the mind and ego.
2. The Atman is of the nature of pure consciousness; it is the awareness of even the ego. It is also of the nature of pure *ananda* or joy. (According to Swami Vivekananda, The Atman is also of the nature of Power.)

3. The Atman is an inseparable part of an infinite, all-pervading consciousness known as Paramatman or Brahman or the Supreme Spirit which is known to the ordinary mind as Ishwara or God. This means man's true nature is Divine.
4. But owing to ignorance known as Maya or Ajnana, most people are not aware of their true divine nature.

Swami Vivekananda summed up all the above truths in a deeply meaningful dictum, 'Each soul is potentially divine.' What is the practical significance of this terse statement of Swamiji?

Practical Significance

Speaking of practical significance, it should be noted that in India philosophy has always been pursued with some practical end in view. (unlike the case in the West where philosophy has always been regarded as an intellectual pursuit.) In India during the ancient period Vedanta philosophy found application in both secular life and spiritual life. But during and after the middle ages Vedanta philosophy came to be identified solely with spiritual life and with the ultimate goal of life, namely, Mukti.

In modern times it was Swami Vivekananda who showed how Vedantic principles could be applied in secular life to solve even the socio-economic problems of life. Swamiji called it 'Practical Vedanta'. What are the practical applications of Vedanta? How can the doctrine of the Atman be applied in practical life?

Swami Vivekananda has shown how the doctrine of the Atman can be applied in practical life not only by educated and well-to-do people but also by uneducated fishermen, cobblers and other poor people. Out of the several practical applications of Vedanta shown by Swamiji, here we have chosen only two for discussion: spiritual self-empowerment and Divinization of life.

Spiritual Self-empowerment

We have seen that although ego-centred life may lead to success in life, it very often creates other problems such as tension, anxiety, competition, frustration, alcoholism, lack of peace and fulfilment etc. Swami Vivekananda has shown that, by leading an Atman-centred life we can avoid these problems and, at the same time, attain self-empowerment and success in life.

Here the question arises, since the Atman is beyond the mind and the sense organs, how can ordinary people lead an Atman-centred life? The answer is, even if a person does not have any direct experience of the Atman, it is enough if he has the deep conviction that he has in the depths of his soul a Divine Centre which is the source of inexhaustible inner power. This deep conviction infuses self-confidence, strength and courage to take up heavy responsibilities and calculated risks and face the problems of life. Says Swami Vivekananda: ‘Teach yourself, teach everyone, his real nature; call upon the sleeping soul, and see how it awakens. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come, when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.’ (c.w.3.193)

Faith in the Atman as the divine Centre within enables a person to have self-respect, exercise self-control, and lead a moral and virtuous life without yielding to dishonesty, jealousy, depression, immorality, alcoholism etc which are often associated with wealth and worldly power. We may remember here a saying of the famous English poet, Alfred Tennyson:

‘Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power,’

Faith in the Atman or the Divine Centre within us will also give us the awareness of an ego-free inner space of stillness and silence, remaining where we can

take correct decisions and maintain inner calm, peace and balance in the midst of the din and bustle, hurry and restlessness of the work field, even in the midst of trying situations. This is what spiritual empowerment means.

Divinization of Life

Although our real nature is the Atman, we are not aware of it because it is covered by *ajnana* or ignorance. However, through proper knowledge (received from a competent Guru), purity of mind and the practice of inner disciplines such as meditation, prayer etc, the veil of ignorance can be gradually removed. When this happens, the inner Divinity, the inner light of the Atman, manifests itself more and more. As a result, human consciousness gets transformed into Divine consciousness. It is this manifestation of inner Divinity and transformation of human consciousness, that Swami Vivekananda called ‘yoga’. It is also what spiritual life means.

Yoga or spiritual life is not restricted to certain practices such as rituals, meditation, prayer, etc done at certain times, but the spiritualization of one’s whole life, giving a Godward turn to one’s whole life, the gradual transformation of human consciousness into Divine consciousness. Ordinary worldly life is the struggle to rise from animal life to human life. In this struggle people often fail, and then they behave like beasts. Spiritual life is the struggle to rise from human life to Divine Life by the transformation of human consciousness into Divine consciousness. Any kind of conscious Atman-centred activity which purifies the mind and helps us to manifest our potential Divinity and transform human consciousness into Divine consciousness is to be regarded as yoga or spiritual life. In this sense education—both learning and teaching—can be done as yoga, work in an office or factory can be done as yoga, household chores can be done as yoga, even playing football can be done as yoga. Every activity becomes a spiritual practice. Referring to this Swami Vivekananda stated, ‘My ideal, indeed, can be put into a few words, and that is: to preach unto

mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement in life.’
(c.w.7.501)

In this holistic spiritual perspective the distinction between the sacred and the secular vanishes. As sister Nivedita has put it: ‘No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern as to quit and to avoid.’ Conversion of one’s whole life into unbroken yoga, Divinization of one’s whole life—this is what Swami Vivekananda has placed before the modern world as the ideal of spiritual life. This is an ideal which a student, a teacher, a doctor, an engineer, a business executive, a dancer, an artist, a housewife, everybody can put into practice.